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**THE SOVIET MANCHURIAN CAMPAIGN:
DECISIVE VICTORY OVER A DESPERATE ENEMY**

CORE COURSE II ESSAY

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Core Course II

THESIS: In August 1945, Stalin and the Soviet Forces employed the teachings of Sun Tzu and Liddell Hart to gain decisive victory on the plains of Manchuria. Yet, in spite of the campaign's unprecedented success, a terrible irony exists — that the victory purchased on the battlefield could have been won by some other means.

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THESIS

In August 1945, Stalin and the Soviet Forces employed the teachings of Sun Tzu and Liddell Hart to gain decisive victory on the plains of Manchuria. Yet, in spite of the campaign's unprecedented success, a terrible irony exists — that the victory purchased on the battlefield could have been won by some other means.

FOREWORD

Soviet historians attribute the unprecedented success of the Manchurian Campaign to the surprise, strength, speed, and depth of the offensive (3, ix). Western scholars, on the other hand, have sometimes discounted the campaign's significance because of the Kwantung Army's inferiority in numbers, technology, air power, anti-tank weapons, and air defense. They have correctly pointed out that the Soviets attacked a Japanese Army already feeling the sting of imminent defeat. Few, however, dismiss the success of Soviet leaders, primarily Stalin, in adroitly applying the teachings of Sun Tzu in both diplomacy and strategic military operations.

Military experts even today marvel at the Soviet Army's perfectly executed maneuver, total strategic surprise, and successful encirclement of the Kwantung Army. Had the Japanese leaders mobilized a greater portion of their available soldiers in Manchuria, better prepared the Army's defenses in depth, and possessed more formidable air power, the Soviets would have paid a greater price for their victory but would have dominated the battlefield nonetheless.

In 1945, Stalin cast the shadow of Sun Tzu across the final operations in the Pacific Theater. Through underhanded diplomacy and an affinity for the military option, Stalin steered the Soviet Union from its war of survival to one final campaign that may have been unnecessary. Sun Tzu would have reminded Stalin that it is far better to risk everything to preserve the peace rather than extend the campaign merely to gain a greater victory.

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To capture the enemy's army is better than to destroy it,
to take intact a battalion, a company, or a five man
squad is better than to destroy them (13, 77)

On August 8, 1945, barely two days after the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan. Moments after the public announcement was made, Soviet forces launched simultaneous attacks against the Japanese in Manchuria, Korea, Sakhalin, and the Kurile Islands. By doing so, the Soviet Union fulfilled the secret terms of the Yalta agreement to enter the war against Japan within three months of Germany's surrender (11, iii).

This report compares the planning and execution of the Soviet Manchurian Campaign to the teachings of Sun Tzu and to a lesser extent, the indirect approach of B.H. Liddell Hart. This document does not claim that the Soviets consciously practiced the principles of Sun Tzu or followed Hart exclusive of other theorists. However, by templating the salient points of Hart and Sun Tzu over the Manchurian Campaign, theory and actual war appear to share convergent identities. Although not intended as a review of Japan's strategy in Manchuria, this report, in order to maintain balance, addresses the Kwantung Army's reactions to the Soviet buildup and invasion, and highlights significant Japanese failures. The Soviet Army's qualitative advantage in weapons and training and clear superiority in number of forces hardly invalidate the Manchurian Campaign as a remarkable example of decisive victory and the application of Sun Tzu in the twentieth century. With few exceptions, the campaign emerges as Sun Tzu's kind of war, from the earliest stages of planning and diplomacy to the final defeat of the Kwantung Army without annihilation. However, this text also reveals the Manchurian Campaign as a possible aberration in twentieth century warfare where the victor, had he a greater affinity for peace than he did for war, may have realized all his goals, as Sun Tzu recommended, without ever firing a shot in anger.

Campaign Synopsis:

Take him unaware by surprise attacks, where he is unprepared
Hit him suddenly with shock troops (13, 133)

At midnight, Tokyo time, on August 9, 1945, Soviet forces of the Far Eastern District attacked the largely unprepared Kwantung Army on three expanded fronts. In a combined arms, joint operation that included Soviet air, land, and naval forces as well as several Mongolian units, the Soviets attacked with nearly 80 divisions across a 3000-mile front (15, 469). In the west, the 6th Guards Tank Army led the campaign's main effort across the Gobi Desert, the Greater Khinghan Mountains, and onto the Central Manchurian Plain. The Japanese believed that only a small raiding force could use the Khingan Mountain approach. The Soviets exploited the Japanese commander's incorrect assessment by portraying the main effort with two second rate armies on the traditional caravan approach paralleling the Hailar railroad. Simultaneously, the First Far Eastern Front penetrated Manchuria's eastern border and attacked west towards Kurin and Harbin. In the north, the Second Far Eastern Front ferried down the Amur and Sugari Rivers and blocked the redeployment and escape of Japanese forces (3, 35).

The Soviet planning staff assigned operational objectives 300 to 800 kilometers deep into Manchuria and anticipated the complete encirclement of the Kwantung Army within thirty days. Weighting the main attack with forty percent of the available forces, the Trans-Baikal Front attacked along narrow break-through sectors in the west that measured only 300 kilometers in width. Although the Kwantung Army did not formally surrender until August 19, the Soviets gained all of their assigned objectives in only six days (3, 35).

Purpose of the Campaign:

In April 1945, the Anglo-American alliance still believed that involving the Soviet Union in the war against Japan was desirable. General MacArthur believed that a Russian attack into Manchuria would prevent the Japanese from reinforcing the home islands. Admiral King, in a minority opinion, contended that the US could win without the Soviets (4, 14). Once President Truman received reports in June that the atomic bomb tests were successful, even he had reservations about welcoming the opportunistic Stalin to the Pacific. By July 1945, contentious issues with the Soviets over Bulgaria and the Balkans reinforced the opinions of those who sided with Admiral King (4, 14-15).

The Japanese Army posed no immediate threat to the Soviets. The two nations had signed a nonaggression pact in April 1941, that was not scheduled to expire until April 1946. Additionally, the Japanese, fearing a second front, had tried to obviate border disputes and preserve diplomatic relations with the Soviets during the treaty period. In fact, on the eve of the invasion, Japanese rules of engagement required Kwantung Army units to avoid contact with frequent Soviet border patrols (10, 3). Until August 1945, Stalin observed Sun Tzu's caution, "If not in the interests of the state, do not act. If you cannot succeed, do not use troops. If you are not in danger, do not fight" (5, 12).

By the time the Allies met in Potsdam in July 1945, Stalin knew that he could succeed and was convinced that the invasion would indeed serve his country's interests. Less than sixteen hours after Hiroshima was bombed, Stalin signed the order to invade Manchuria, largely confirming suspected motives to achieve political and territorial gains before Japan surrendered. At Yalta the year before, Great Britain and the US conceded the territorial gains if the Soviets would open a second front in the Pacific Theater (3, 16).

Stalin, largely mistrusting the Anglo-American alliance, needed to seize Manchuria before Japan surrendered. He believed that Soviet control of Manchuria would influence the post-war division of the islands and selection of the Supreme Commander to rule over

the occupation (4, 124-125) With his people weary of war, Stalin feared a lack of support for another campaign, especially an operation that might become protracted against a tenacious albeit declining power. Consequently, Stalin directed the military to prepare a swift campaign that would achieve decisive victory in the first phase. Like Sun Tzu, he neither desired nor could afford a protracted war. Asked about a preemptive attack by the Kwantung Army, Stalin remarked, "If they do attack, they will at least solve what will be my most difficult problem with my own people. It will be obvious who is the aggressor" (3, 15).

Nature of Conflict:

For it is the nature of soldiers to resist when surrounded, to fight when there is no alternative, and when desperate to follow commands implicitly (13, 133).

The Soviets attacked unexpectedly during the rainy season with nearly 80 divisions totaling more than 1.5 million men against 31 Japanese divisions in Manchuria and Korea. Although the Kwantung Army could have potentially mobilized more than a million soldiers, never more than 300,000 joined the fight While many of the Soviet divisions were first class units transferred from the western front, the Japanese defended Manchuria with a garrison army, an army of occupation since 1932 (3, 9). Besides the enemy, Stalin's forces had to master Manchuria's rugged terrain, inhospitable climate, and an indigenous population that hated the Soviets (3, 55-57).

In numbers, the Soviets had 25,000 artillery pieces, 5500 tanks, and 4370 aircraft against Japan's 5360 artillery tubes, 1115 tanks, and 1800 aircraft (15, 469). Sun Tzu wrote that in war, numbers alone seldom confer an absolute advantage. In Manchuria, the Soviets had superiority in numbers as well as an edge in firepower, mobility, and more technologically advanced weapons Many of the Kwantung Army's best divisions had been withdrawn for defense of the homeland, fortifications had been stripped, and ammunition reserves depleted In a land divested of its resources, lacking sufficient tanks

and adequate communications and transport, the Kwantung Army, nonetheless, stood resilient in morale and loyalty to the emperor (11, iii) The Japanese commanders could only hope that the irrational factors of motivation and intuition, favorites of Sun Tzu, would somehow make a difference.

Deception and the Indirect Approach.

Now war is based on deception. Move when it is advantageous and create changes in the situation by dispersal and concentration of forces (13, 106).

The Soviets suffered bitterly in the fall of 1941 as a result of Hitler's deception and Operation Barbarossa. By 1944, the Soviets, who had routinely practiced deception in several campaigns against the Germans, included the concepts of strategic flexibility and *maskirovka* in their doctrine (15, 366). However, even Stalin did not expect to achieve the complete strategic, operational, and tactical surprise that the Soviets enjoyed in the Manchurian Campaign and Sun Tzu had described several centuries ago

Quite unexpectedly on June 24, 1945, the Japanese asked Stalin for assistance in negotiating a conditional surrender with the Allies. Taking a page from Sun Tzu's book, Japan attempted to undermine the alliance and break the will of those who demanded the empire's unconditional surrender. The Japanese ambassador made it clear that Stalin could expect enormous territorial and political concessions for his help (3, 17). Stalin technically agreed and subsequently feigned normal relations with Japan off line in order to influence Japanese perceptions about Soviet intentions and possible schedules for invading Manchuria. By August 8, the Japanese believed that Stalin would soon specify his price for assistance or offer an ultimatum. The Japanese would have done well to heed Sun Tzu's maxim, "when the enemy's envoys speak in humble terms but he continues preparations, he will advance" (13, 119) True to Sun Tzu's words, Stalin neither specified a price nor expressed an ultimatum. Instead, he created the preconditions for strategic surprise and exploited Japan's lack of vigilance. Stalin's fabricated diplomatic and

political bargaining closely followed Sun Tzu's preference for attacking the enemy's plan at its inception.

Although the Kwantung Army was aware of the buildup of Soviet forces in the Far East and had fair intelligence on total Soviet strength, the Army had no idea as to the distribution of particular types of units. The Soviets expertly camouflaged their prepositioned supplies, ammunition, and equipment. Top commanders used disguises and secrecy when visiting the front, and risked incomplete intelligence rather than signal the attack with aggressive reconnaissance. Communications, training, unit movements, and engineer preparations portrayed an Army improving its defense (3, 23-24).

The Japanese also employed a deception plan. Because the Kwantung Army had been stripped of its best soldiers and equipment, Imperial Headquarters directed the commander to create a "semblance of strength" to deter the Soviets and the Chinese. The Japanese accomplished this task by referring to divisions as armies in messages and radio traffic (11, iii). With the ruse apparently successful, the Soviets overestimated Japanese combat strength by a factor of three. The Japanese unintentionally encouraged the Soviets to use overwhelming force by recklessly applying Sun Tzu's maxim, "I make the enemy see my strengths as weaknesses and my weaknesses as strengths" (13, 97).

The Soviets incorporated a brilliant plan for maneuver throughout their preparations at the tactical and operational levels. By advancing on concentric approaches, the three Soviet Fronts achieved the advantage of mutual support and confused the enemy as to where the main effort would occur. Liddell Hart said, " . an army should always be so distributed that its parts can aid each other and combine to produce the maximum concentration of forces at one place, while the minimum force necessary is used elsewhere to prepare the success of concentration" (6, 328).

The Soviet Army also maximized the effects of the indirect approach by attacking deep into the enemy's rear with tactical air forces, conducting airborne operations against key logistical and command centers, and sealing the enemy's escape with Navy,

amphibious, and riverine operations. Additionally, the Soviet planners included Hart's concept of dispersed strategic advance. The basic plan -- attacking across a 3000 mile front on several concentric approaches to objectives nearly 800 kilometers deep into the Manchurian interior -- reflects this concept of calculated risk taking. Hart said, "...the cumulative effect of partial success, or even a mere threat, at a number of points may be greater than the effect of complete success at one point." (6, 333). The Soviets applied this maxim by initially dispersing to cause the enemy to do the same and then concentrating locally against exposed Japanese weaknesses.

The Japanese, on the other hand, fielded an army nearly in disarray. Although initially planning a defense in sector, depleted resources and the transfer of many experienced combat troops to the home islands forced the Kwantung Army to change its strategy to a coordinated delay (10, 1). By August, the Army had failed to complete unit movements, build new fortifications, or rehearse the new plan at the operational level. Truly as Sun Tzu remarked, "...against those skilled in the attack..." the Japanese did "...not know where to defend" (13, 96-97). Refusing to acknowledge the Soviets' absolute superiority, the Japanese again ignored Sun Tzu and failed to maintain the capability to withdraw from the battlefield. The Soviets, on the other hand, knew the art of direct and indirect approach and displayed enviable skill in maneuvering. Consequently, the Soviets encircled the Kwantung Army in what Soviet leaders have called their greatest victory (3, vii). Sun Tzu credited overwhelming victories in his time to skilled leaders who had correctly set the conditions for battle, properly prepared their soldiers and trains, and flawlessly executed a strategic plan of great vision. In Manchuria, the Soviets clearly possessed an acumen for battle and "...conquered an enemy easily conquered" (13, 87).

Victory By Any Other Means:

Sun Tzu applauded the warrior who subdued his enemy without fighting. In 1945, the Soviets still had a choice between war or diplomacy in achieving their goals with

Japan. Clearly, Sun Tzu's teachings indicate that national leaders must be equally as concerned with how they play the game as they are with winning the victory. Sun Tzu and his disciple, Liddell Hart, believed that the skilled leader chose weapons over diplomacy only as a last resort.

Liddell Hart wrote, " ..the true aim is not so much to seek battle as to seek a strategic situation so advantageous that if it does not of itself produce the decision, its continuation by battle is sure to achieve this" (6, 352). In June, 1945, the Soviet Union had a win-win situation. The US believed that the allies could end the war through one of three methods: 1) continued conventional bombing, blockade, and invasion of the home islands, with or without a simultaneous invasion of Manchuria 2) bringing unbearable devastation to the Japanese cities with the atomic bomb and 3) inducing the Japanese through diplomacy to accept some form of early surrender (4, 3-4). Two of these options omitted any mention of the Soviets.

Acting Secretary of State Grew, former ambassador to Japan, believed the Japanese were ready to end the war but could not accept an unconditional surrender that did not guarantee the polity of the emperor (4, 16). He attempted to persuade President Truman to pursue diplomacy and even wrote a draft for the Potsdam resolution that would send a clear signal to Japan that the constitutional monarchy would survive the surrender. From intercepted messages between Moscow and Tokyo, Truman knew that the Allies could communicate their post-war intentions to Japan through Stalin. Apparently fearing charges of appeasement, yet in contradiction to Sun Tzu, the Allies never seriously considered this option. The revised resolution appeared to leave the emperor's status in question, and as expected, the Japanese refused the terms (4, 37).

Never enjoying the close relationship with western allied leaders that existed between Churchill and Roosevelt, Stalin frequently operated outside the alliance in his own interests. As a consequence, a candid exchange divorced of suspicion did not occur between members of the alliance at Potsdam. Stalin refused to confirm the date for his

intended invasion, and Truman did not share his game plan for employing the atomic bomb (4, 89) Had a consensus strategy with detailed milestones prevailed at Potsdam, the Allies may have ended the war in quite a different way First, Truman and Churchill could have agreed to delay using the bomb until Stalin's Manchurian Campaign had a chance to drive the Japanese to peace. Or all of the leaders could have agreed to delay any further ground campaigns until the atomic bomb was dropped and Japan had an opportunity to surrender. With the former, Truman may have spared the world the horror and devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Using the latter, Stalin could have at least prevented the unnecessary loss of life in Manchuria. Sun Tzu would have intensely questioned an invasion to destroy an army that, in the strategic sense, had already been or soon would be defeated by other means.

Assessment:

Stalin personally translated the foundation of Sun Tzu's theories into success during the summer of 1945. However, in the end, the *master* would have assessed some failures as well to Soviet statecraft. At the strategic level, conceivably Stalin would have realized his objectives with or without the invasion. Had he helped the Japanese find an acceptable surrender plan or had he only waited to review Japan's reaction to the atomic bomb, his army would have inherited through the indirect approach virtually the same territories by merely surrounding the provincial borders of Manchuria. Had Stalin adhered to his mid-August schedule and coordinated the invasion, as promised, with China, the futility of the Kwantung Army's mission, if not surrender itself, would have already visited the plains of Manchuria (4, 114).

At the operational level, Stalin violated one of Sun Tzu's most important maxims "It is military doctrine that an encircling force must leave a gap to show the surrounded troops there is a way out, so that they will not be determined to fight to the death" (13, 132-133) Stalin's forces left no gaps in Manchuria Had the emperor not delivered the

imperial rescript commanding his forces to surrender, Japanese Monographs indicate that the Kwantung Army would have continued to fight suicidally to the last man (10, 20).

The alliance nearly committed the same mistake. After months of bombing the homeland and then threatening an invasion, the alliance had finally cornered a wounded animal. At first lacking any propensity to discuss the future of the emperor, the Allies unintentionally hardened a weakened enemy. In the end, the victor, who calmed his vengeance, prevailed with unimaginable power and humane post-war intentions.

At the operational and tactical levels, Stalin's army, although remarkable in its accomplishments, experienced many of the same problems that plagued the German Blitzkrieg. The Soviet Far Eastern Army experienced great difficulty in command and control of its formations and outran its logistical tail by several hundred kilometers (3, 39). Had the invasion taken the full thirty days as expected, the army could not have sustained the initial pace nor maintained the concentration of firepower.

Historical records indicate that 80,000 Japanese and 8000 Soviet soldiers were killed in the Manchurian Campaign (3, 37). Had the emperor not ordered the surrender, what additional cost would each army have paid? Sun Tzu would have surely agreed with Clausewitz that "To bring a war, or one of its campaigns, to a successful close requires a thorough grasp of national policy. On that level, strategy and policy coalesce, the commander-in-chief is simultaneously a statesman" (2, 111). If Clausewitz and Sun Tzu could have witnessed the carnage of Hiroshima, both would have regretted the truth of General MacArthur's words aboard the *Missouri*: "Men since the beginning of time have sought peace.. Military alliances, balances of power, leagues of nations, all in turn failed, leaving the only path to be by way of the crucible of war" (1, 235).

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